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The Educational Project:
a convival tool?

Can you legislate individuality and initiative and an esprit
de corps? Can you help such things into being by regulation or
with Ministerial guidelines? To summarize this study, Norman
Henchey reviews the stories of these not altogether unusual
schools, and discovers in them characteristics common in English
language education that show some affinity for the criteria and
intentions of the "Educational Project", foreign as its
technological manifestations may seem to the pragmatic
pluralism of English schools. He notes the illusions that have
been arising in Quebec in face of the apparent contradictions in
recent Ministrial initiatives. But looking forward, he points to a
remarkable list of transformations in the educational scene that
would arise from such a successful implementation as the
Ministry intends (provided that that intention is not itself an
illusion), under the guiding concept of the Educational Project.

As we reflect on these case studies, three questions arise.
Do these schools provide illustrations of Educational Projects to
any degree? What is the status of Educational Projects in
English-language education in Quebec at the present time?
What are the implications of Educational Projects for the
future? The short answers are "Yes", "Ambivalent", and
"Radical".
     The schools which are described in the case studies are
not necessarily the best in Quebec, nor are they different or
"alternative" schools, nor are they specially privileged; nor are
they, on the other hand, typical of all schools. They do provide
illustrations of what was happening in schools, in Quebec, in
1981. They represent, to some degree at least, the diversity
that is found among English-language schools.
     They also illustrate some of the important issues in
education at the present time. Keith is an open-space school
that has been attempting to mainstream physically-handicapped

children, in collaboration with the MacKay Centre for
handicapped children in Montreal. Wilder Penfield is a more
"traditional" elementary school in which three different projects
have been evolving: a board-wide French program, a set of
lunchtime special-interest clubs for pupils, and a "parenting"
program for the parents of the community. Courtland Park is
the school that perhaps comes closest to the model of the
Educational Project, with a tradition of parent and community
involvement, a formal Orientation Council, an application of
special education techniques to the individualization of learning
for all pupils, and a stress on pupil activity; in a way, it is the
"activist" school recommended by the Parent Report.

The Lennoxville School District is involved in a board-wide
project to coordinate the teaching of French as a second
language among its nine elementary schools, through a program
of full-day bilingual kindergartens and an hour-per-day second
language program through all six years of the elementary school
system. Sir Wilfrid Laurier is a secondary school specializing in
cycle one (grades 7 and 8) which is following a definite plan for
the development of "core" programs of general education, and
an approach to school life that is personalized and
student-centred. These schools are doing different things, in
different ways, in different contexts. The question is: Do the
case studies reveal common patterns among the schools and, if
so, do these common patterns suggest any relationship to what
may be defined as an Educational Project?

A unifying attitude, charisma, and informality

There are, indeed, a number of common elements. First,
each school has an identity, a character, an ethos; there is
some unifying activity or attitude that brings a coherence to
the institution, that characterizes it as different from other
schools. In Keith, the integration of a small number of
handicapped children into a few classes raises the sensitivity of
the whole school community to the handicapped, and eliminates
boundaries between persons. In Wilder Penfield there is a kind
of school-as-service attitude that is expressed both through the
clubs for the children and through the parenting program for the
adults. In Courtland Park it is an attitude that all education is
special education because every child is special, an attitude
widely shared in the school community.

In the Lennoxville District the unifying principle that binds
different schools together is a sense of search, looking for a
reasonable and balanced way of helping the English-speaking
children of the different communities communicate easily and
effectively in French and at the same time preserving a fragile
English culture in the region. In Sir Wilfrid Laurier it is a
concept of "core", a centering both in the heart of the
curriculum and on the person of the early adolescent learner.
In each case a project, however limited its origins, spreads to

become an identifying characteristic of the school (or in the case of Lennoxville, a set of schools). In the age of the photocopier, these schools are originals.

A second characteristic is the presence of charismatic leadership. In every instance there are one or two persons -- a special education teacher, a director general, a principal, a vice-principal, two teachers willing to try something, a teacher of the handicapped -- people prepared to take a risk, to follow an idea, to do extra work, to develop new relationships with others. These are the people who develop, articulate, and sustain the projects (and through the projects, the institutions); they provide the leadership that stimulates others to become involved. In all cases, the leadership came from professional educators, and in most instances the central person was an administrator, seeming to confirm the widely-held belief that educational leadership should, and does, come from creative and dynamic administrators.

Third, there is a general focus on a need to be served and a task to be done. Structures, processes, and mechanisms seem to be considered secondary, and there is a general preference for using informal and changing arrangements to organize projects and to consult the interested parties. In some cases (Lennoxville, Sir Wilfrid Laurier) there is a written plan or statement of purpose, but in other cases this does not seem to be considered necessary. There is a general impression that the success of the various projects rests more on person-to-person contacts than on formal groupings and meetings. Only in the case of Sir Wilfrid Laurier does there seem to have been a good deal of thought given to the goals of the school as a whole; in the other cases, the attention was on a particular need or project, and it was as a consequence of commitment to this project that the goals or character of the school may have been altered.

Fourth, in all cases stability and continuity are necessary for the ongoing development of the projects. This is implicit in the reliance on personal leadership and informal structures. In no case does it appear that the change in the character of the school has been "institutionalized" in a way independent of the people and the relationships among them, that a mechanism or structure of continuity has been assured.

Finally, except in the case of the Lennoxville second language project, there is little evidence of systematic evaluation of the activity beyond informal and impressionistic indications of success or, more commonly, the satisfaction of the participants. For the most part these are not seen as "scientific" programs that can, or should, be monitored to determine their effectiveness.

We are looking, then, at activities that (1) touch the identity of the school as a whole, (2) are inspired by charismatic leadership, (3) rely more on informal patterns of interaction than on formal structures, (4) depend on a degree of continuity and stability in the community, and (5) do not use

formal mechanisms of evaluation of effectiveness. Furthermore, these activities are **educational** in goal and content; they are also **professional,** in the dominant role played by administrators and teachers, and the more or less supportive role assumed by parents and other groups.

Do they meet the criteria, and does it matter?

But are these Educational Projects, in capital letters? Do they match the definitions of process and product? Do they meet the criteria?

To label these projects as Projects is to do little more than to ratify what already exists. And the projects do not meet all of the criteria that may be suggested; a community is not always clearly identified, and various groups, especially parents, are not always actively involved, though they may be generally supportive of the initiative; some projects are centered within the individual school while others are in important ways external to a school or common to a number of schools.

On the other hand, the concept of an Educational Project (as found in various government documents) is external to the reality of an individual school, a construct which is created and developed. Its power to provide norms by which individual projects in individual schools are judged better or worse, closer or further away, needs to be examined critically. We must ask to what degree it is necessary or useful to have a set of theoretical criteria by which projects are to be evaluated. We must also return to the question raised in Chapter I, the issue of process versus product: is the Project an activity in which to engage, or a plan to develop?

It may be more important to think of the Educational Project as a set of guidelines and suggestions to assist persons and groups who may not have available the kind of leader or the support system from which the schools in the case studies so often benefited. In this sense, the theory of Educational Projects is not so much concerned with criteria for judgement as with a catalyst for the kind of "chemistry" that gets people working together for a common goal. It does not matter a great deal if these case-studies meet the criteria; what is more important is that they do reflect a philosophy of learning and development, a spirit of involvement, and a sensitivity to the ecology of the school and its community.

To the question "Is the Project a process or a product?" the answer that a student of Zen would give is "Yes". There is no distinction between product and process, because the Project must be an organic unity, the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

An affinity nevertheless

Whether we think of Educational Projects as helpful guidelines or as normative criteria, the concept has not yet captured the imagination of the English-language educational community of Quebec. The more common reactions have been lack of knowledge, indifference, and suspicion. It is only recently that materials on the Project have been available in English. Furthermore, the community has been preoccupied with other concerns that are pressing, worrisome, and highly visible: declining enrolments and their implications for closing schools and declaring teachers redundant; a blizzard of pressures, proposals and programs; and a more general anxiety about the health and survival of English-language culture, organizations, and institutions in Quebec. Finally, there has been a certain suspicion that the proposal for Educational Projects was essentially a cosmetic operation to mask the true face of government control, centralization, and standardization.

There is, however, a deeper issue here. It is the distance between a concept that is expressed in philosophical terms and a community that is philosophically casual in its pluralism and pragmatism, a distance that needs to be surveyed if it is to be bridged. The pluralist character of the English-language community of Quebec - and it would, perhaps, be more accurate to speak of communities - is the result of many factors: the mixing of British and American educational ideas, teaching materials, and personnel; the different social and religious traditions of English-Catholic, English-Protestant, and English-Jewish populations; the growing ethnic diversity and the growing consciousness of ethnic identity; the continuous geographic mobility of this community, into Quebec, within Quebec, out of Quebec, and often back to Quebec.

This pluralism in the communities is reflected in the schools, and a number of important characteristics result from it:

a general lack of educational ideology

a tendency to rely on traditional practices

a pragmatic view of the process of education which is increasingly open to various innovations

a reliance on the leadership of key individuals rather than of key concepts or key structures

a focus on administrators, teachers' associations and, in the Protestant sector, on school boards, more than on individual schools or the provincial government.

This pluralism and pragmatism have tended to be mutually reinforcing, pluralist needs being met with pragmatic strategies and this pragmatism leading to more pluralism, as individual schools and teachers in the freedom of the sixties and seventies developed their own objectives, adapted the programs, selected and often created their teaching materials, and used many

criteria to evaluate the learning and development of pupils.

Because this community is inclined to the plural and the practical, it is uncomfortable with the singular and the theoretical. It is more at home with notions of planning, innovations, programs, committees, and educational projects of all sorts, and learns from their descriptions; it is not used to a Plan of Action, the reform, the regime pedagogique, encadrement, the Orientation Committee, and the Educational Project, and it is not touched by their definitions.

It is not so much a matter of translation or tactic of communication, nor is it simply another episode in the ongoing struggle of an "English" group to preserve its independence and privilege. It is both epistemology and politics, a certain lack of interest in "the" concept and a certain skepticism about "the" solution - especially if the authors of the concept and the advocates of the solution are in a Ministry of Education whose policies this community sometimes finds threatening and in whose activities it finds little expression of its own orientations.

In short, the Educational Project is a concept that is foreign to the English-language educational community. It is a policy which this community has had little hand in shaping, and one whose value for the development of high quality English-language education remains, for many, ambiguous. Yet the approach to change, participation, and innovation, as well as the overall goal of vital, dynamic schools responding to their environment, are all part of the natural life of English-language education; they are ideas with which many educators and parents are quite comfortable. If the structures are less formal, the procedures more **ad hoc,** and the plans less scrupulously articulated, there is nevertheless a certain affinity between English-language education and the underlying philosophy of Educational Projects. What is not yet too clear is the potential contribution Educational Projects can make to the future development of education, French and English, in Quebec, a subject worth some further reflection.

An anomaly: the technological management of individuality

In the context of the present reorganization of Quebec education, he the Educational Project is an anomaly wrapped in illusions. The major thrust of the Green Paper, the Plan D'Action, the Régime Pédagogique, the new curricula, and the proposals for evaluation is in the direction of the scientific and technological management of education. This is the educational philosophy which values standardization of timetables, terminal behavioral objectives, detailed curriculum guidelines, systematic and objective evaluation. It is a worldview based on rationality, coherence, consistency, and systems; it is an orientation not peculiar to Quebec, but one which reflects a general trend to

go "back to basics", to stress accountability, and to favour competency-based approaches to learning; and it is found throughout North America. It is a thoroughly modern system of education.

The Ministry promoting this structure is also promoting the idea that individual schools must reflect the diversity of their own communities, that each school should develop its own character, style, dominant values, and orientation, that all the participants in the life of a school should share in the creation of this distinctive character, and that mechanisms are being made available, in legislation, to enable schools to pursue this goal. Along with the social science and technology which inspire the Régime Pédagogique and the curriculum guidelines, the arts and humanities are to be represented in the Educational Project of each school. It may be an attempt to fuse the two cultures of C.P. Snow, but it does look more like an anomaly, something inconsistent, a piece that does not quite fit, a question.

Because it is a question that does not yet have an answer, it invites speculations and, lacking facts, we turn to illusions. One illusion, shared by many not only in the English-speaking community, is that the Project is a smokescreen for the powerful centralizing, technocratic, and statist character of the educational reforms. Those who hold to this illusion may or may not attribute Machiavellian motives to the Ministry, but they do believe that the proposals for the creation of Projects are too vague, too feeble, and too poorly thought out to serve as counterbalance to crisp, systematic, and thoroughly researched government plans for school organization, curriculum, and evaluation.

A second illusion, that seems to be cultivated by many of the advocates of the Project, is that there is no contradiction between this proposal and other aspects of the educational redirection taking place. The Educational Project with its emphasis on participation and school initiative is to them a natural extension of Regulation Number One and the later formation of school committees, and it complements the minimum standards and common guidelines, by inviting schools to adapt them to their own style and to go beyond them in order to address local needs.

A third illusion may be suggested: the possibility or, as some would phrase it, the promise that the Educational Project may be taken seriously and that it may lead to a radical reshaping of the pattern of educational decision-making in Quebec. This view is based on the belief that the motives behind the original proposal are irrelevant. It suggests that the popularization, creation, and development of Educational Projects, far from being complementary to existing structures and proposed regimes, would challenge those structures and lead to a new definition of the role of the school, and to a new pattern of relationships with school boards and government.

A challenge to policies and board structures

If the parents, administrators, teachers, students, non-teaching personnel, and other interested groups in a community begin to come together, in some form or other, to develop an Educational Project and to create a school "with character", they will begin to think of the school as "their" school. Already we see this happening in many places where various committees, sometimes parents, sometimes teachers, sometimes administrators, achieve consensus on such issues as the religious or moral character of the school, the kind of conduct that is to be promoted among pupils (and teachers), the way in which learning is to be approached and organized, the development of a curriculum focus, or the particular interrelationship which should exist between the school and the community. Private schools and so-called alternative schools in the public sector are fairly clear examples of this process of developing school character, but many other elementary schools and often units within secondary schools are heading in the same direction. The case studies which have been presented show both variety of content and approach and similarity of general orientation.

But these trends, far from being complementary to existing policies and structures, present a challenge to them. Schools which have distinctive identities rooted in a community also have distinctive needs; they may not need greater financial resources than the system normally allocates, but they do need acknowledgement, integrity, continuity, and self-direction. Although there are enabling and facilitating mechanisms available, educational projects are still fragile because they do not fit. Schools with Educational Projects cannot "belong" to school boards, in the way we now think of schools as units of boards and school policies as extensions of board policies.

Schools with Projects are certainly going to be more difficult to close by board administrators using board criteria. Schools with Projects will soon cease to accept the assignment of administrators (especially principals) and teachers into and out of the school by school-board decisions for board purposes or collective agreement clauses. Schools with Orientation Councils are soon going to insist on a veto or at least a strong influence on the appointment of new teachers, wanting to make sure these teachers are congruent with the "orientation". Schools with Projects will want more control over the school budget and spending priorities. Schools with Projects will be adopting curriculum innovations and learning designs that may not fit too well with board regulations or government guidelines. Schools with Projects will in many places begin to attract pupils away from other schools without Projects, or with Projects that parents find uncongenial. Finally, schools with Projects will start developing networks to include other schools, within the same board or in other boards, that share the same goals and interests.

Transformations not without strain

The illusion in all this is that the different ideas of Educational Projects and the different approaches to them will be successfully promoted in the educational systems, that schools will be encouraged and aided to develop their own Projects, and that enough of these Projects will be vigorous and healthy and develop their own dynamic. If this is an illusion, then the reality will be a very centralized, unitary, and increasingly brittle school system, and an exciting opportunity will have been lost for Quebec.

On the other hand, every project implies a projection, and if dozens or even hundreds of successful Educational Projects are developed, what effects will this have on the educational system? First, schools become more autonomous, and there is greater diversity in goal and style among schools. Second, schools with good Projects become recognized for their quality and become successful in their ability to attract students. Third, successful schools are preoccupied with preserving their continuity and acquire the final say over the key area of selection and preservation of personnel. Fourth, in systems with declining enrolments, new tenure policies have to be negotiated and new policies for the assignment of staff worked out. Fifth, school closings and redundant teachers become more and more a matter of supply and demand, consequences of the "market value" of their Educational Projects.

Sixth, the importance of school boards declines, if they continue to exist at all, as they become coordinators of services to schools. Seventh, private schools become progressively incorporated into the public system, each with its own Educational Project. Eighth, some system of "vouchers" is introduced as a means of ensuring access to a wide range of choice in schools and an overall system of "client protection" is developed, probably by the government. Ninth, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity is accommodated both by Projects that have a particular focus (trilingual Jewish elementary schools) and by those that have different options within the same school (multiconfessional humanistic programs).

It is a dangerous illusion to believe that this would be accomplished without strain and without transformations taking place in what we call the education system. Creative thinking is required, to determine the kinds of decisions that are properly the responsibility of public bodies such as governments and parents' committees, and those that are the responsibility of professional bodies of educators. There should be public debate on the range of tolerance for educational diversity: What must be taught in **all** schools regardless of the Educational Project, and what kinds of learning and projects, if any, should be forbidden? We have to find new ways of allocating resources, money, and people among schools, and also find ways to preserve certain learning, teaching, and curriculum models which

are important, even precious, but which may be temporarily out
of fashion.   This is an obligation of a democratic Ministry of
Education.

Among the models of learning, teaching, and curriculum
which "are important, even precious, but which may be
temporarily out of fashion" is English-language education.   If the
Educational Project, as philosophical and singular concept, has
not yet appealed to the pragmatism and pluralism of the
English-language educational community, it may nevertheless be
a pragmatic method of preserving and enriching the diversity of
the education of the Catholic, Protestant, Jew, and
non-believer; of the Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Irish, Scot and Italian;
of the child in Beaconsfield and the child in Blanc Sablon,
through a network of English-language Educational Projects.

And in the coming age of information overload,
megastructures, pocket calculators, videotex, global
problematiques, general systems theory, and biotechnologies, it
may be that the idea of a school serving a community, with
many participants pursuing a sense of identity and belonging
through an Educational Project, will become what Ivan Illich
would call a "convivial tool" for **all** Quebecers.